
Kawaii: Adventures in a Parallel Universe

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Abstract

Japan is full of surprises and challenges for user researchers. This paper describes our experiences conducting research in Japan: why it's worth going; communicating through interpreters from both sides of the fence; looking beyond the data to cultural cues; and a brief sidebar discussion of the crucial importance of "kawaii," that keen Japanese appreciation for all that is loveable and cute. Real-life examples highlight areas to consider when planning overseas research.

Keywords

Ethnography / Ethnographic Studies, Market Research, User Research, Japan, Non-Western Nations, Organizational Impact, Cross-Cultural Studies, Consulting, Interpretation, Kawaii

Industry/category

The research practices described have been commissioned by and applied to products developed by U.S. companies to be sold in Japan, as well as by European countries to be sold in Europe: mobile telecom hardware and services, consumer and professional-level software, hardware, computers, and peripherals. The practices are flexible and could easily be applied to consumer packaged goods, appliances, and other categories.

Project statement

Regardless of the client, most user research in Japan is a fast-paced game to try and discover, in a limited

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amount of time in the country, key factors that will ensure the success of a product. This is followed by the task of creating coherent research reports and presentations under the influence of jet lag. We describe practices learned from multiple research projects, exploring the collection and application of user insights from a non-Western culture to the development of products and services.

Project participants

- Research specialists (outside consultants or internal)
- Engineers and developers
- Design team members
- Product management
- The broader corporate audience affected by the product's direction

Project dates and duration

The projects described here ranged from full-time on multi-year projects to simpler projects that were completed in several months. All were completed since 1998, the most recent in 2002.

Process

WHY DO RESEARCH OVERSEAS, AND WHY DO IT YOURSELF?
The most common application of ethnographic research with customers is to better understand their needs in order to create a product or service that will be successful in that market. When dealing with foreign markets, this becomes even more crucial. Stories about the small size of Japanese homes are common in our culture, but without experiencing those spaces directly and understanding the kinds of products being selected, the tradeoffs and storage solutions that they

are implementing, the full meaning of "small size" can't be fully grasped.

Additionally, a culture such as Japan represents a "lead user" market in many categories. For example, the adoption rate and cultural integration of mobile phones far surpasses that of anywhere else in the world. Their homes are dramatically small, and their mass transit system is extremely punctual (despite a chaotic system of overlapping service providers). In each of these cases, Japan is a stimulating market in which to conduct research, if only to highlight a set of needs that exist in our culture, but in more subtle ways. Specifically, one study revealed that the space constraints in American and Japanese homes were similar, that users spoke about their spaces and the products that went into them in quite similar ways, but the issue was make-or-break for any product in the Japanese market. Understanding the most extreme needs, and figuring out how to solve them, would provide a win in both markets. Mobile telecom companies have been studying the adoption of mobile phones in Japan for several years in order to identify possible triggers that could be replicated in their home markets.

LOGISTICS WHEN EVERYTHING IS STRANGE: TACTICAL ISSUES OF DOING RESEARCH IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

If you are unfamiliar with the locale you are studying, get help. If your organization has a sales office nearby, get it on board. Consider partnering with local firms that specialize in market research, or, ideally, ethnography and product design. Tread carefully, as with any vendor, caveat emptor, but now add in the cultural unknowns around communication styles, timeliness, billing structures, and so on. Another option

Kawaii in Japanese Life

"Kawaii": *cute, loveable, and innocent.*

The appeal of kawaii in Japan transcends gender and age, often in ways that are surprising to Westerners. Why?

- Kawaii affords pleasure in micro-relationships with objects. The Wallace and Grommit strap hanging from an overworked salaryman's cell phone provides room for an emotional attachment with an everyday object.
- Kawaii gives a friendly face to an otherwise impersonal corporate entity, giving people a way to build a relationship with a brand.
- Kawaii takes personal responsibility: Apologies made by a bowing dog for construction in the subway lets passengers know the subway system cares about their inconvenience.
- Kawaii is polite: In an indirect culture, commands are less threatening when issued by a smiling cat.

is to find a U.S. firm with a branch or facility in the destination. Having some local guidance in the process is essential. To recruit respondents, ensure that U.S.-based criteria are mapped appropriately to corresponding ones for the area being studied (that is, do they have broadband widely adopted? Do people live with their parents until they are older? Do the same brands drive the market as in the U.S.?). Get local support to locate interpreters, recommend neighborhoods for staying, and serve as a general "cultural guide," explaining the plethora of new and unusual things that will be encountered.

A cultural guide can also help arrange sites to visit through introductions, which are crucial in Japan. While it can be challenging to gain access into homes and workplaces in Japan, the right introductions will open possibilities. Also, we find that worrying about social rules can be overly intimidating. Customs that need to be followed are generally deducible by observing: everyone is taking off their shoes, everyone is standing on the left side of the elevator and walking on the right, and so on.

INTERPRETING THE PARALLEL UNIVERSE: LITERALLY AND FIGURATIVELY

Interpretation creates a very entertaining "language soup" between interviewer(s), respondent(s), and interpreter. For example:

1. *You ask a question:* Where is the eye contact; who is nodding in "understanding"?
2. Interpretation
3. Respondent answers the question: Where is eye contact? For example, are you nodding to words you don't understand?

4. Interpretation (it may be simultaneous, or small to large "chunks," and it may vary throughout the interview): Where is everyone's eye contact?
5. Follow-up question: Where is the eye contact, and who is nodding in "understanding"?

Conversing through an interpreter takes practice. We gain experience from working with interpreters, but the respondents typically have not had this opportunity. This actually supports the research partnership that is at the base of ethnography, a collaborative building of rapport, since the very act of communicating is being sorted out as the interview proceeds.

For the bilingual, the other side of the fence is being both interpreter and researcher. Knowing the product team, questions can be anticipated and clarifications requested of the user before interpreting for the rest of the team. This is expeditious but can lead to an occasional multi-minute lag time where accompanying team members get jittery that a five minute discussion may be translated simply as "She likes it." Effective non-verbal cues indicating the tempo are important.

WHY THE CLIENT SHOULD GO

It is crucial that the consumers of our findings actually travel into the field, visiting the end users of their product in their homes or offices, and observing daily life in the culture. There are many details that ethnographers are asked to collect, but there is a serendipitous aspect to the cultural immersion that we can't provide. In one situation, closely held organizational beliefs about a competitor's packaging strategy in Japan were effectively debunked by browsing through a shopping area. They purchased the product in order to prove their case to their colleague

back home. Similarly, other categories of product or service may provide remarkable metaphors for what does not yet exist in their category. We found a package of Sony AA cells that suggested a high-quality consumable for your Walkman, and this was a provocative example of what the client was trying to achieve in their category.

As with any consulting engagement, creating advocates who will champion the work and tell stories to their colleagues is crucial. Walking through the neighborhood of Shibuya at night, densely packed with young people, music blaring out of enormous skyscrapers covered with billboards and video screens is essentially a changing experience for a visitor, and, in combination with sipping tea in a Japanese home while they share their holiday cards and digital photographs, is a powerful inspiration. These stories will be told through the organization, and there's little substitute for actually having the client being there to see, taste, hear, touch, and smell.

CULTURAL IMMERSION

This notion of being immersed is crucial. Seeing the culture we visit as ethnographers rather than as tourists has enormous impact. You may find yourself in a situation where the backdrop (the stuff we normally ignore, as noise) is unfamiliar. Everything seems abnormal. Regardless of the project, we are trying to understand a cultural model – the connections between people, artifacts, and other factors. It is immediately apparent that the artifacts are different, and we are constantly reminded to check all our assumptions. This visceral experience places us in a constant state of synthesis. For example, in Japan we see the enormously hi-tech toilets that make the popular press

in the U.S., but we also see old, poorly maintained squat toilets, relics from another era. In this case, we can begin to understand the role of highly visible, advanced technologies in the Japanese culture, even if they are not adopted as we might expect. This may run counter to our standards in the U.S. and certainly challenges some of our perceptions of Japanese culture and technology.

Results

- Product needs discovered and identified in detail, informing development decisions (that is, how to fit into the workflow, prioritization of features, and so on). Influenced corporate culture, with stories of other countries now being told with richer, more useful detail and increased awareness of overseas users.
- Increasing visibility of these methods for understanding other potential foreign markets (that is, China) as well as the potential to do more domestically.
- The information obtained from these projects will carry over to other development efforts that target Japan.

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